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THE ROUND TABLE

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON FRESHMAN ENGLISH¹

I. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTION OF THE COURSE

Setting aside questions of detail as to special purpose and procedure, one can distinguish broadly between two conceptions of Freshman English. The course may be regarded unambitiously as a merely elementary drill in English composition, or it may be regarded more seriously as a subject in which the student is given a maturer and more largely significant training in thinking and in expression, and in which he is to a considerable extent made acquainted with a correct standard of taste in literature. The distinction we wish to make here is not so much a distinction in kind as a distinction in degree; and it is clear that even when the higher conception of the course is adopted the training in elementary matters is still required. The present committee, when it considers the inconsistency between a secondary-school treatment of the subject on the one hand, and the spirit and purpose of university instruction on the other, and when it remembers the increasing number of students whose contact with a liberal type of training is virtually confined to this one course, does not doubt that the second and more ambitious conception of Freshman English is the only one which a university can afford to adopt.

II. THE TEACHER

1. *A high quality of teacher is indispensable.*—Once this decision is reached, however, and an earnest attempt is made to develop the higher values of the course, it becomes apparent that the first thing needed is a teacher of unusual powers. The point, as an abstract statement, will be freely admitted on all sides. Distinction of mind, energy of character, humane and thorough education, in addition to literary taste and skill in composition—all these things are indispensable in a truly competent teacher in a rightly conceived course in Freshman English. Nor can it be justly said that the need of such a teacher is equally great in the other

¹ This report was presented to the Central Division of the Modern Language Association of America at Madison, Wis., December 28, 1917. Portions of the original report only (some of them in revised form) are here printed. No reference is made at any point to special conditions arising from the war.

Freshman subjects; in this respect English may not unreasonably claim a very special place. In no other subject, to mention one obvious thing only, is the contact of a personal and intellectual kind between student and instructor likely to be so intimate or potentially so significant. If the Freshman English instructor is to be compared with instructors in other Freshman subjects, let the comparison be with the lecturers in important basic courses, such as history or biology, not with the subordinate teachers connected with such courses; for to the English instructor is wholly committed a responsibility at least equal in importance to that assumed by the professors in charge of these other fundamental subjects. And yet, in spite of these truths, it is clear to anyone familiar with the facts that we do not now employ a sufficient number of adequate teachers in Freshman English. The result is that a Freshman entering college runs a perilous chance of being allotted for his instructor in English, instead of a person who is talented and experienced, one who is inexperienced, unfitted by nature for the work, ill trained, and sometimes, in addition, reluctant and disaffected. We are coming more and more clearly to recognize that here lies the crux of the whole matter: if we cannot obtain a high quality of teacher, we cannot make of Freshman English what it ought to be.

2. *The supply of competent teachers must be increased.*—We do not now employ a sufficient number of qualified teachers, largely because a sufficient number of qualified teachers is not to be had. Without a frank recognition of this fact there is no hope of appreciably bettering our present conditions. Now what are the causes of this deficiency? Obviously the profession of teacher of English, contrary to what the importance of the subject would lead one to expect, is on the whole failing sufficiently to attract men and women of marked ability. And why does it not attract such persons in greater numbers? A part of the answer is no doubt to be sought in the present conditions of the academic profession generally and is not peculiar to English. The rewards for university teaching are incommensurate with the quality of service required or assumed, and the number of properly qualified and ambitious men who decline to make the sacrifice involved is probably increasing. But in part the answer is peculiar to English and especially concerns us here.

The difficulty is, as everybody knows, that the man who goes into English must, almost without exception, give a great deal of time to the teaching of composition. And why does composition so frequently act as a bugbear? The causes are various, but they are in part removable.

In the first place, there are first-rate men, intensely interested in the teaching of English literature, who prefer not to teach composition. There are others who make no objection to teaching composition, or who indeed take great pleasure in teaching it, but who nevertheless do not wish to give to it the whole of their time, both because the teaching of one subject soon becomes monotonous and because the teaching of this particular subject exclusively does not normally put them in the way of, nor allow adequate time for, a sufficiently varied growth in intellectual culture. Both classes—those who prefer not to teach composition at all and those who do not want to teach it exclusively—may well be disturbed when they observe the actual facts—viz., that in the modern university so much teaching of composition is required; that often teachers of composition are for a long period confined to the one subject with little or no opportunity to share in the teaching of literature;¹ and finally, that in spite of these uninviting conditions these same teachers of composition, whatever their competence, are, with the rarest exceptions, but slightly rewarded in salary and still less in professional rank and dignity. Foresighted men of intellect and energy will scrutinize these matters before engaging themselves in the profession; and can it be doubted that many are deterred from entering it? Of those who do enter it, many, once they perceive clearly what the conditions are, not unnaturally show signs of uneasiness and discontent.

In view of these considerations, what policy is indicated? We need to attract and keep better teachers. The surest way of doing this is to remove as far as may be the conditions which promising students considering the profession may properly feel to be unreasonable. If we sincerely desire to improve the quality of the teaching in Freshman English (and the cause of Freshman English is in the end one with that of the department of English as a whole), we shall do whatever is practicable to lighten the burdens and increase the opportunities of the teacher of Freshman English and of other similar courses in composition. Certain principal means to this end are presented and briefly discussed in the following recommendations; the adoption of all or any of them will mean a bettering of our present condition; the refusal to adopt them in some measure can mean nothing but willingness to perpetuate the unsatisfactory state in which we now find ourselves. The Committee, then, submits the recommendations as shown on page 595.

¹ Here and elsewhere we have in mind the common type of organization, in which literature and rhetoric constitute one department. We believe, as will presently appear, that such an organization makes for the best interests of our course, and we should regret the breaking up of the combined department.

a) *That the university dignify teaching in Freshman English¹ through prompt promotion of competent instructors and through liberality in salary.*—At present, whatever high opinions may here and there be held with regard to it, the ultimate administrators do not, in effect, regard the course as important. Generally speaking, promotion is not possible on the basis even of unquestioned excellence in the teaching of Freshman English, and the height to which the salary of a Freshman English instructor may mount is limited to a figure wholly incommensurate with distinct professional worth and with the long training which is demanded. The mere size of the course will long render it unavoidable that much of the instruction be carried on by teachers who can be provided with but a minimum of advanced work, and who must therefore expect to spend years mainly in Freshman English. If *outside* Freshman English, a career cannot be provided for the members of our staff, it must be provided *inside*. Once the university, through promotion and through tangible increases in salary, shows its genuine respect for the course, Freshman English will necessarily present to promising men a more engaging prospect than it does at present. Such men will feel more willing to take their chances on promotion to a program that will afford variety and satisfy their inclination to teach literature when they realize that in any case, whether conditions permit them to attain their full desire or not, they will not be without substantial rewards.

b) *That the instructor be guaranteed a liberal amount of leisure for intellectual self-advancement.* Everybody knows that most ambitious instructors want, in part at least, to teach literature. The next thing to teaching literature, in point of desirability, is opportunity, independent of teaching, for assimilating it. Leisure, to the kind of instructor we want, means literature—the opportunity to read it and to study it and to write about it. The objection which the instructor has to theme reading is not so much that it is hard labor—hard as it is—but that it consumes a vast amount of time with at first little, and finally no, intellectual remuneration. What, then, if we may raise again the old question, should be our instructor's work? Probably, to approach the matter generally, few would be inclined to ask a promising man to bind himself to the concentrated reading of manuscript for more than two hours a day. If we count a six-day week, not to be over liberal, and add three hours for conferences, we have a total of fifteen hours a week. But we need not depend upon our general impressions of what is reasonable to ask; we have the support of opinions based on still unquestioned evidence. The "Hopkins Report" is specific, and it more than confirms us; an amount "in excess of ten hours a week of reading and five of conferences is insupportable for more than a limited period." And it will be observed that this statement is concerned, not with what is desirable

¹ The term "Freshman English" may be taken in this paragraph to include in a general way other lower-class courses in composition, teaching in which is frequently associated with work in the first-year course. From the point of view of the instructor or of the department there is little difference between teaching in Freshman English and in other composition courses somewhat more advanced in character.

in consideration of the teacher's advancement toward greater present and future power to serve his students, but only with what from the point of view of mere physical endurance is tolerable. Now add to this fifteen hours nine hours in recitations and four to six hours in preparation for recitations and, allowing no time for such matters as the examination of revised themes and mere bookkeeping and no wastage, we have reached approximately thirty hours, or six hours a day for five days. In at least one state university a departmental stenographer is required to work only seven hours a day for five and one-half days; so that, if the case be typical, the computation just made gives the instructor no considerable advantage in point of time definitely required over a person doing clerical work. So much for the instructor's program in terms of hours; let us now see what it means in terms of composition. The indispensable unit of measurement is provided us by the "Hopkins Report": "The average reading rate for the average . . . college instructor" is "2,200 words an hour." An average instructor, then, in a six-day week, reading two hours daily, can read 352 words for each of seventy-five students, 440 words for each of sixty students, and 660 words for each of forty students. If we insist that our instructor shall not be "average," the capacity for reading will perhaps be slightly greater, and the figures may be altered accordingly. These long-familiar but neglected data are worthy of being dragged forth again and solemnly contemplated. As long, however, as such figures as we here revive are revived only to be forgotten, to be casually dismissed as suggesting only counsels of perfection, remote and unattainable, so long will Freshman English retain its well-deserved reputation as an effective means of stifling whatever of real talent and intellectual promise remains long within its influence, and so long will this reputation keep out of its service many of the men whom we most want to attract.

c) *That competent instructors in Freshman English be allowed to include in their programs the teaching of literature.*—The disadvantage of the exacting and unremunerative character of much of the work in Freshman English is aggravated by the fact that the course not infrequently, as before observed, constitutes the whole of the instructor's program; and in many instances where it does not the relief comes only through the substitution of one composition course—sometimes even a more exacting one—for another. The result in such cases is a dulling monotony, and, since scant leisure is afforded for independent pursuits, there is danger of a gradual narrowing instead of a broadening of intellectual interests, with consequent diminishing, instead of enhancement, of the instructor's effectiveness in his work. Here again the unavoidable fact in the case, the relatively little demand for advanced courses in English literature, creates a difficult problem. Once the importance of Freshman English is effectually recognized, however, a great deal can be done. Certain possibilities readily suggest themselves. Even the instructor teaching three sections of Freshman English might be allowed to prepare himself thoroughly in a single author and lecture on this author in "Survey" or in another course; in a second year he might add another author, or take a different one. Again, as is at

present sometimes done, "Survey" and other courses can be conducted partly in tutorial sections, and instructors can be given charge of such sections. Or as instructors show their ability they might more freely be given as one-third of their work a special course in some writer whom they have mastered. It is entirely proper that the university should not scrutinize too meticulously the number of students registering in such courses, nor be overconcerned about the returns which such courses bring, feeling satisfied if through such means it can retain instructors each of whom is giving ideal service in two sections of Freshman English. Again, the men of the higher ranks in our departments, through assuming as a group a larger share of the burdens of composition, can open more courses in literature, or participation in such courses, to competent persons working mainly in Freshman English.

3. *Instructors should receive primarily a literary and humanistic training, not a training primarily philological or otherwise technical.*—Persons intending to teach Freshman English should seek primarily to secure a wide and critical acquaintance with literature, particularly, of course, with English literature; and, so far as possible, to perfect themselves in the art of writing. Attention to these subjects constitutes the surest and most natural means of developing the knowledge, sympathy, and skill indispensable in a truly qualified teacher. The fundamental branches other than literature should not be neglected; such subjects as the development of rhetorical theory, historical analysis of English prose style, and English philology should receive the attention appropriate to "minor" studies; they may even fill in the curriculum of the prospective teacher a place but slightly less important than literature, but literature itself and the criticism of literature should by all means be accorded the place of emphasis. It follows that students in our graduate schools preparing to teach Freshman English should be concerned with large acquisition in literature and in the qualities of prose style and the principles of criticism, and that investigations which they enter upon in satisfaction of requirements for degrees should be in a broad field, not in the field of philology, nor in other forms of what is known as scientific or technical research. A person entering upon the business of teaching Freshman English at the end of three years of graduate study should not feel, as sometimes he unquestionably does feel now, that there is little or no connection between his late activities as a student and his present activities as a teacher. If the higher degrees now given cannot or do not adapt their requirements to a training suitable for our teachers, new degrees for the special purpose should be created; of the two alternatives perhaps the more desirable would be a free interpretation of the present degrees. It will not be thought that we wish to deter our prospective instructors from engaging in significant scholarly enterprises; we merely

point out that, in their years of preparation for teaching, students should emphatically subordinate investigation to acquisition, and that so far as they give themselves to investigation they should subordinate scientific and technical research to undertakings of a liberal character. Never perhaps was the moment more propitious for urging, as for our own purposes we are now doing, a return to the literary tradition in scholarship. The chief modern founders and arch-representatives of the opposite tradition, a tradition of pure science in a foreign domain of art—who does not know that we mean the German universities?—are the objects of a searching and revealing criticism, from which they can never emerge with their old-time prestige; whereas France, conspicuous for its long devotion to humane letters, is being sympathetically observed and more adequately appreciated. It would seem curious if anyone should say that following such a tradition is inimical to the interests of productive scholarship; it all depends upon what sort of scholarship one wishes most to honor and to cultivate; and one may even doubt whether the most intensely specialized research would not greatly profit by having its basis in a broadly humanistic training. Finally, to return to our main theme, if only our teachers may come to us at the end of a training of the kind here suggested, we shall not ask whether they have had experience in specifically pedagogical courses; a small amount of such training—a two-hour course perhaps for one semester—might very well prove profitable.

III. CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS

Students in the course should be classified according to their proficiency in the use of English.—In no subject is difference in talent, in early environment, and in preparatory training more significant. It is impossible to teach to the best advantage a class in Freshman English whose members represent widely varying degrees of attainment. So far, therefore, as may be practicable in the individual institution—and that it is largely practicable, even in large universities, a consideration of both conditions and actual experience shows—the principle of classification should be put into practice.

IV. EXTENSION OF THE REQUIREMENT IN COMPOSITION

The Committee recommends that in the case of students who do not receive a creditable grade in Freshman English (a grade, say, of “fair” on the ordinary scale) the common requirement of one year’s work in composition be extended to include a second course, a two- or three-hour year course in composition. Such a measure seems imperative if the labor spent on such students in the first year is not to be for the most

part wasted labor; and it is suggested as a means of attaining what it is the evident desire of our universities to attain—a fair degree of literacy in all of their students.

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AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM-PROJECT METHOD

I. Why discuss educational method?

- A. School studies tend to become exceedingly formal; their social origins and uses are too often lost sight of.
- B. Hence they fail to provide pupils with real and fruitful experiences leading to actual control of social values—they cease to be the best possible means of growth.
- C. The effectiveness of any course of study—what it becomes in actual practice—depends upon the methods of the teachers who attempt to carry it out.
- D. There is always possibility of improvement in education—especially now when a new and scientific educational psychology is becoming available.

II. What the problem-project method is.

- A. Organization of school life in accordance with life in the home and in the community. A “project” may be defined as a single complete unit of purposeful experience.
- B. Not to be exactly identified with any other current conception in education, such as interest, motivation, self-activity, socialized recitation, correlation, recapitulation, naturalism, developmental method, incidental teaching, informal teaching, self-government, logical thought movement, type studies, inductive science, laboratory method, shop practice, etc., though indebted more or less to all of these.
- C. A *principle*, not a rule, formula, fad, or panacea.
- D. Not to be thought of as embracing every aspect of learning or every type of useful experience.
- E. A natural method of *learning*, that is, of growing, which teachers may stimulate, guide, and render more effective. In essence this method is that of *full participation in typical experiences generally involving group activity or group relations*.